

Chase the Wind by ej_writer

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Summary:

Billy is Hawkins' football star. The spot light reveals some nasty things.

1. No one knows and no one wonders what becomes of me

Billy makes the football team his very first week in Hawkins.

It took a bit of convincing for the school to let him join since the season started in August, almost three months before he moved to town, but one look at how he played and the coach promoted him from a shoe-in for next year's lineup to this season's quarterback.

Hawkins High hadn't had a football season worth anything in its recent history, the team always made up of nothing but a roster of scrawny ex-populars trying to impress their way into the cheerleaders pants and uninterested boys only there because their dads were reliving their teenage years through them.

Closest thing to a decent player they'd had in a long was Tommy H, and he'd been permanently kicked off the team his freshman year for racking up too many violent penalties in one season. Billy though, he gives them a run for their money.

First game of his season and he'd gotten three touchdowns practically unassisted by his team, and slowly with practice every other day, the other boys start taking to his influence, and the Tigers creep their way up towards being actual competition.

With every Friday night that he plays, Billy realizes more and more that this is what he wants to do for the rest of his life.

The stadium lights on him, the boys on the team patting him on the back when he did something right, the people out in the stands cheering for him because of what he did, that was something he never wanted to lose the experience of.

Out there on the field, nobody really knew who he was under the helmet. His jurisdiction was the student body, not their parents and grandparents and aunts and uncles who came to watch them play. To them, he was just number six, the Tigers' quarterback who could run circles around the other boys on both teams, not the Hargrove kid

that everyone wanted a piece of.

Football was *his* thing. It wasn't like when his dad coached him in baseball when he was nine, or signed him up for basketball as a form of discipline when he was fourteen. Friday nights in the fall were spent doing exactly what *he* wanted, and he felt free.

Because in its own way, it's like an act of rebellion, one that Neil can't control that keeps him away from him most days because of practice. If he's out there doing his very best, there's nothing that his dad can hold over his head. Instead, he'll be right there with him putting on his little show of being proud at the end of every game.

At home, he would sit around in his room for hours, drinking and smoking and listening to his music so loud his ears rang just trying to feel *something*.

On the field though, between the impact of a body against his, the heavy shoulder pads weighing down on him, the noises of the crowd and the coaches' whistles and the band all going at once, the feeling of the firm leather ball in his hands and cold wind on his face, he didn't need to chase that anymore, that ability to be present in his own life.

For once, he doesn't feel so *numb*.

So when on the day before the big game against their rival team, the Jets, his dear old dad decides to shove him down the basement steps, Billy shows up to practice anyways. That rush of being out there on the turf and doing something right for once isn't something he's willing to give up because of a stupid incident like that.

Coach notices right off the bat that he's off his game, sees it in the way he favors his right leg, the way he can't throw as far or as hard as he usually does and how he's sweating bullets from the minimum of effort, so he gets sidelined for practice.

They all know it's just for practice though that he'll be out, the Tigers can't afford to lose their star player come game time. Billy's ordered

to stayed rested and as hydrated as he can until then, and no smokes either.

It's good enough a deal for him, he doesn't really need the practice anyways when the rest of the team is a bunch of bumbling fools and ball hogs who could hardly remember the difference between which end zone they were supposed to score in, but even just sitting there is rough on him.

There's a feeling under his skin like he's sunburnt even though it's cloudy, and every bruise and point of impact from the fall is throbbing until he can't even find it in himself to ignore it long enough to pay attention to the play coach is going through with the rest of the boys anymore.

He goes home and downs a handful of pain meds, and wakes up the next morning feeling worse than before, exhausted and sore to the potentially fractured bone.

He decides he doesn't have the stomach for breakfast, and his hair goes completely undone. He's hardly even able to drag himself out of his bed and get presentable enough to take him and Max to school.

Already it's obvious that there's no way he's gonna be in any shape to play come 7, he realizes he might as well stay home and try not to push it too far, but Neil already told him, if he skips a single game he's getting pulled and going back to his other sports, so he drives to the school anyways.

The day goes by in a flash, probably because he slept through half his classes or was too busy thinking about the effort it took to breath to pay attention to the rest, and before he knows it, it's t-minus fifteen minutes to game time, and he still can't see straight through the pain.

He feels like an idiot for not getting better when he was supposed to, but more so for even considering quitting. That was exactly what Neil wanted, for him to give up the one thing he loved because of something stupid like a tumble down some stairs.

He grinds his teeth against his mouth guard until it feels like his

jaw'll pop, then does it some more. The boys do their huddle like they're supposed to, but he's just sort of standing there focusing on staying as still as he can while the rest of the team gets hyped around him.

Coach pushes the door open with a shout of something that's supposed to be inspirational, but the rush of cold air from outside makes Billy feel like he's overheating.

The hurting on its own isn't all that bad anymore, or at least he doesn't think so compared to how it was that morning, but before the game even starts, they've gotta run the start of the field through the team banner like they did at all the home games, and that alone is enough to make his head spin.

Some part of him knows he shouldn't do it, wants to pass his helmet on and stand on the sidelines with all the twig-thin freshman boys who never get their shot before he hurts himself worse, but he doesn't. He falls right into line with the rest of the boys, gets in starter position and-

And he fumbles the ball. The next time he gets the whistle blown with a false starts.

Coach threatens to pull him for costing them the five yards, and Billy's ready to argue, but one glance up into the home stands at the stern faced man in a trucker cap, a redhead on either side, and he swears it won't happen again. Squares his jaw and pushes forward, takes what's coming.

The Tigers do ridiculously bad in the first half, they don't get the fourth and ten, and the other team gets touchdown after touchdown while they get nothing.

And it's Billy's fault, because he's winded, his eyes are blurry at the edges and it just, it fucking *hurts*. He can't get his shit together for long enough to make a single play, and everyone's noticing.

It's the refs' job to call him on it, but the announcer doesn't help anything, makes it known over the loudspeakers that their prized number six isn't on his best game, but that just makes him fight

harder.

Even if he can't run more than half of one yard line at a time, even if he has to stop every few seconds because his blood runs cold and his face goes numb and he thinks he's gonna pass out, because he's not gonna give up for this.

It's an honest to God miracle that he even makes it to halftime. And that's *barely*.

Barely, that he's able to handle the aching in his whole body that takes his breath away. Barely, that he doesn't throw up his guys every time he gets hit by another kid just doing what they're supposed to and a sharp pain runs through every bone in his body. Barely, that he's able to keep the tears from spilling over while he's getting chewed out in the locker room for his piss poor first half.

He nods along, mumbles out a sorry coach when he thinks he's supposed to so it seems like he's listening, but really he's just focusing on trying to breathe. Besides, he doesn't think he could hear him over the blood pounding in his ears if he tried.

Those twenty minutes off the field go by too fast, a sentiment he *never* thought would have crossed his mind, and before he's even got the chance to get his bearings, the team's lining up to go back out there.

One of the other boys, in an attempt at raising the morale of the only person on the team capable of recovering this late in the game, pushes on the back of his helmet and wishes him luck, and he's got to grab onto the wall just to not collapse.

If he can't take a playful shove from one of their boys he knows he won't be able to handle himself on the field, knows he's being stupid and stubborn again, but can't lose this, he is going back out there.

He makes it for all of three minutes into the third quarter without passing out, but without scoring either before shit goes sideways. He

figured he'd take what he could get performance wise, so by the time their second play is over, he's almost feeling proud of himself for pushing through.

At least, that is until he can't do it anymore.

Because number 23 on the other team shoulder checks him *hard* and the both of them go down on the 20 yard line. Except Billy doesn't get back up.

He can't, he finds. The fall took every last bit of fight he had left in him.

It's just too much, the pain in his chest and his back and fucking everywhere else completely takes over his senses, and even when the other guy gets up and he's still just, laying there.

He doesn't hear the kid asking if he's alright, or the way the crowd goes quiet either, doesn't see anything more than the blurry face above him, without any idea how long he's down for. All he knows is that he feels sick and that he's shaking and that he can't sit up.

The one that knocked him down offers him a guilty hand up. He misses it on the first try, but he grabs it with a grip that's definitely too weak and he's basically no help as he's pulled to his feet.

The stadium lights he usually loved to have on him make blurry streaks that burn across his vision and sends a throb of pain straight to his head as he almost topples over again, but the other kid makes sure he doesn't let go of him.

Once he's coming back to himself and he's sure he's not going to lose consciousness, he shakes everyone trying to help off of him. Even with the ref and the coach and the other kids crowding him, his eyes lock straight onto Neil Hargrove and his disapproving scowl up in the bleachers.

And Billy decides he's done.

He doesn't care about proving shit to anyone anymore, doesn't pay any mind to the consequences, he just, rips his helmet off and throws it to the ground, and storms off the field, shoving anyone who's in his

way.

Even though he's limping like a son of a bitch, nobody stops him as he shoulders past the coach shouting at him to get his helmet back on, or past the cheerleaders kneeling for an injured player and the nerds in the bandstands, through the gate and back to the locker rooms.

He can't stop the tears that fall the moment the metal door swings shut behind him, or the sobs that echo off of the walls of the empty locker room as he tries to shake his shoulder pads off of aching shoulders.

It wasn't about embarrassment, he couldn't give a shit less about that, it wasn't like this would be the first time in the season he'd gotten hurt out there, and it wasn't about the pain, he'd dealt with enough of that. This, this was about Neil.

About hurting himself on purpose to please an apathetic father, having to choose between doing what made him happy and being safe, what he knew to anticipate the moment he got home after a spectacle like that.

He pulls his jersey back on, pretends he doesn't see the ugly black bruises on his ribs, and throws his weight down on the bench, defeated. He'd been so sure he would be able to fight to the end, to play good even though it hurt so bad.

But he couldn't do it, and now he's afraid.

2. No one understands the way it feels to feel like me

Summary for the Chapter:

The chief comes to check on Billy in the locker room.

Billy thinks about leaving, moseying on home after the scene he'd just caused, but he'd be in enough trouble as it was. He didn't even want to think about what would happen if he got back to the house before his dad did, or if he put his car in a ditch because his hands wouldn't stop shaking long enough for him to drive.

So he just sits in the locker room alone, slouching back on the uncomfortable wooden bench until he's leaning his weight against the wall and counting the cracks in the cement ceiling to try to calm himself down. It doesn't help, it makes the room feel even more like it's closing in on him, so he closes his eyes and focuses on getting out of his own head instead.

The door swings open at some point, making him jump nearly out of his skin. He checks the clock hanging on the wall beside him and, once his eyes focus, he sees it's only been about long enough for it to be between start of the fourth quarter, so it's not the boys coming back, so he sits up pin straight, squares his shoulders and gets ready for whatever coach is gonna say to him, or for if it's Neil coming in to give him what for for embarrassing him.

But when the man speaks and Billy finally has the guts to look over at him, it's not the coach or his dad, it's a cop. The Chief actually, same guy who'd pulled him over twice since he'd moved in barely a month ago.

Letting his posture slacken again knowing it's nobody who's going to yell at him, Billy tips his head back against the textured wall, shivering at the way his hair, wet with sweat despite his shitty efforts on the field, gets pushed up until it's ghosting over the back of his neck. He's focused on that feeling, barely listening as Hopper says, loud enough that it echoes back in the room empty except for them, "I need to talk to you, Hargrove."

Billy mumbles out his response, hoping this will be quick, but despite his outward indifference, his heart's beating too fast in his chest, and he can feel his hands shaking, despite the grip he has on the bench beneath him. "Didn't do nothin' against the rules."

"Relax kid." The cop puts his hands up in front of him, to show his apparent lack of threat. The keys on his belt jingle as he takes a few boot-dragging steps closer to Billy, and it makes his ears ring. "They just sent me to make sure you weren't doing anything illegal in here by yourself."

Billy scoffs, doesn't know how else he's supposed to respond to an accusation like that, as if he had no right to quit after what had obviously been a bad injury, and Hopper must take it as an invitation to keep pressing. "You gonna tell me what happened out there?"

He sits himself down on the bench opposite of Billy, taking his hat off and holding it in his hands, a sign of removing his authority. But no matter how friendly he *thinks* he may appear, Billy's done this before and he doesn't like it, being interrogated. He grinds his teeth and refuses to answer, as the questions keep coming.

Hop just sighs, rubs a hand over tired eyes while he tries not to be bothered by Billy's lack of cooperation. Billy himself would be lying if he said the action didn't make him nervous, didn't remind him all too much or that implacable calm his own dad parroted until the doors were shut for the sake of his pretty little wife.

It makes him simultaneously want to confess everything and never say speak to anyone again, but the chief doesn't wait up for him, keeps asking more questions. "You takin' somethin'? Doin' anything at all you shouldn't?"

Still he refuses to answer, so Hopper, sighing as he gets almost palpably frustrated says, "Alright, look. You wanna know the truth? Your step sister sent me up here. Told me your old man wouldn't be too happy after what just went down."

Then, in the face of more silence from Billy and what must be the most annoyed look on the planet with his sister, the chief offers, "I can talk to him if you need me to, but first I'm gonna need you to

cooperate.”

Of course she would snitch to the cops, the naive brat. Billy decides to break his silence, but only to try to negate whatever Max might’ve fessed up about. “I played lousy and I pussied out. There’s nothin’ else to it.”

He looks at Billy like he’s expecting more, an eyebrow raised and an edge to his gaze that said, ‘well?’ But Billy isn’t ready to bite just yet, so he returns it. Fixes him with a look of his own like he wants to know what he wants from him, and it definitely pushes the right buttons, because the chief bursts out with, “Look kid, if you think you can handle it, be my guest, but I’ll be the one who has to deal with it when shit gets too real for you.”

Any attempt at being relatable and calm was long gone, his demeanor having done a complete 180 as he leans forward on the bench and talks in a voice that’s slightly raised, barely able to hide the emotion behind it as he basically threatens, “So tell me the truth. Do I need to be worried about Neil Hargrove?”

It does the opposite of what he intends, makes Billy shrink back in on himself instead of open up, but he doesn’t seem to care, because he stands back up, pushing himself to his feet with a long sigh through his nose like he’s disappointed in him. “Okay, kid. Just know that you’re off the team if you don’t go back out and finish the last quarter.”

That makes Billy freeze, but as he battles between what he wants to do, which is to stay quiet, and what the chief wants him to do, which is to fess up, his lip between his front teeth until it’s hot with blood rising to the surface, he settles on asking, “Did they say that?”

Hopper turns back to him and nods, holding his hat in both hands and turning it in a circle by the brim. “Coach told me to let you know when I came up here.”

Billy scoffs, because he knows that’s something the coach would say, but to say it to *him*, the star, after what had happened. He couldn’t even begin to fathom that. “I got fucking hurt.”

“Yeah, and right now they think you’re a washed up brat who threw a tantrum about it.” A look of overexaggerated contemplation crossed his face, and he says, in another attempt to bait Billy into a confession, “Unless, I were to get a statement out of you, then you’ll have an excuse.”

“You trying to blackmail me, chief? S’a bad habit for a cop to get into don’t ya think?”

“No worse than lying to a police officer.”

“Right.” His eyes roll so hard he would’ve made himself dizzy, if he wasn’t already. “Ain’t what the snitch said enough?”

“The snitch.” A humorless chuckle, Hopper shifts his weight from foot to foot like he wants to walk out again, but he’s got Billy talking, so he scolds, “You know you should be grateful that you have someone looking out for you.”

“Whatever.” But Hopper still doesn’t give up, doesn’t say anything, and at first Billy doesn’t either, but the tension is just too much, and he folds under the older man’s stare. “Look he pushed me down the fucking stairs, alright? That enough for you to get off on or do you want me to go into detail?”

“Jesus Christ kid, I’m a *cop* .” There’s so much anger in his voice alone that Billy can tell he wants to yell at him, maybe even hit him for disrespecting his authority, but he doesn’t. He just continues to stand around impatiently, and from that alone, Billy can tell he promised Max to keep his composure when he came up here. As angry as he was with her, he thanks the stars up above that she had enough sense to put conditions to this. “You need to cooperate with me.”

“And if I don’t?”

“It could put your old man away, or at least get you some protection.” Nothing but a lot of talk, some self righteous nonsense Billy wants absolutely nothing to do with, so he let’s it be known, scoffing and looking away to show he’s bored of Hopper’s lies, show him he’d heard it all before and didn’t believe him one bit, and it

must hit a tender spot with the chief, because he demands, "What? You think I'm not going to try?"

Billy smirks all smug-like to answer his question. Because no, he absolutely did not think he would do a damned thing about Neil, and he wasn't about to sit around and stroke his ego. "Look, I'm just doin' my damn job here, and would appreciate it if you'd get your attitude in check for five goddamn minutes."

That's a bold faced lie enough that it makes him snap back, "Oh, your *job*. You know you pigs think you're some *real* heroes 'til it gets to the courts and they find him innocent. Don't-don't check up on kids like me again til we gotta bullet in our brains." Billy bites out.

He hadn't meant to let himself get so worked up, but every word that came out of Hopper's mouth was just another blow to his ego, to his sureness that he was strong enough to handle it on his own. It was chipping away at him until there was vulnerability showing through the cracks, something he'd been taught to never let happen, and so he swears he won't. Puts on his fighting shoes and refuses to take it. "I *know* how this shit works."

He gets the sense Hopper's in the same boat, trying to one up him, and that makes him feel at least a little better, to know he'd been able to post that much of a threat to a grown man. It doesn't feel so good when the chief opens his mouth again though.

"Do you? Or do you just play the victim so you can get out of the consequences?" It's his turn to be smug now though, because Billy just knows he looks as much like a kicked dog as he feels. He's digging right in where he knows it'll hurt Billy, and he's smiling like, like he's *proud* of himself for one-upping him. "I'm serious, Hargrove. You just trying to get a rise out of me or do you need my help? Because believe me, I will walk out that door right now if you don't."

He spits a venomous, "Fuck you." no reason to play along anymore, but Hopper already had him all figured out now, and he's unfazed, just gives him a simple, "Have a nice life then, kid. Remember you've got a ticket due before Christmas."

Then he's turning around again and heading straight for the door.

Watching Hopper make good on his threat makes this awful feeling settle in the pit of Billy's chest. Something like realizing that he'd pushed away his one genuine chance at help. Or maybe a little more like the dread fear of what's inevitably going to happen to him if he *doesn't* get that help. "Wait."

Hopper stops in a heartbeat and raises an eyebrow, and for a moment, it's clear that he was never *really* going to walk away, that this had been his plan the whole time. Set the trap for Billy so he would have to admit it to get what he needed. Out assholing the asshole.

His voice isn't any kinder, still gruff and stern in all the worst ways for a boy like Billy to hear, but he can tell he means it when he asks, slow and even, "What do you need me to do, kid?"

It's humiliating, it's next to impossible, it's everything he ever wanted, telling someone what needed to be done. "Need to go to the hospital."

"Okay." He waits for Billy to stand, then walks over to wait by the door for him. Standing again makes the still looming pain so much worse, makes him thankful he had enough sense not to get in his car like this and dragging him out of all of his angry thoughts about the situation. Seeing him wincing with every step, Hopper teases, "You know you could've said that in the first place?"

But it falls short, sounding more insulting than anything. If Billy were any stupider he might've reacted to that, might've let himself get pissed off again that this cop, this *stranger*, came into the locker room to scold him and act like his bullshit savior or something, but he knows he needs it, and he's just too tired in every way to fight it right anymore. He'd have time later to regret that.

The instant the metal door swings open it feels like there's a thousand eyes all on him. Some part of him knows he's just another face in a sea of people, the game still going, the crowd enamored, but there's still this deep sense of shame, limping after Hopper leading him to his truck, a good 10 feet in front of him, both still in uniform.

It's embarrassment that he's tailing after a cop like he's some helpless

kid. It's apprehension, not trusting that Hopper isn't going to take advantage of the situation, ask him for something in return for all this. It's fear that Neil will find out he left the game with a man he told his biggest secret to and do his worst.

But he doesn't stop except once to lean against the gate and catch his breath, and once to scan the parking lot for Neil's truck.

He takes a deep breath, and hoists himself up into the truck with a groan from both the vehicle and him, as every last worn out muscle in his body tightens, hesitant, but ready, to be carted off towards his one chance at breaking the cycle.

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Besides them, there's nobody in the ER waiting room but some kid with alcohol poisoning from pregaming. Taking note of the grass-stained uniform still clinging to his body, the kid salutes Billy when they walk in, almost immediately proceeded with him throwing up in a plastic trash can previously used for a drip in the ceiling.

The chief waits for him by the receptionist's window, letting him limp his own way over to get his wrist band and give the woman a vague description of his injuries. He blames football, doesn't mention the part where he was pushed down the stairs, and she tells him the doctor would check him out soon.

For the hospital being mostly deserted, the wait is still ridiculously long, each minute that passes on the wall clock, one minute off from Hopper's watch, feeling like an eternity on his aching body. He's not too far off from needing to borrow that garbage can from the drunk kid when the receptionist finally calls for a William Hargrove.

They take his blood pressure, unsurprisingly it's off the charts, and ask him more questions.

The nurse has a nasally voice, and a grimace like she already knows the type of kid Billy is. If he wasn't feeling like he was dragging around tons of bricks just to follow her into the pre-exam room, he might've tried to do something about it too, but maybe it's for the best that he didn't, the chief hovering over his shoulder and all.

Again she asks him what happened, expecting a few more details this time, and so Billy turns up his charisma dial as far as it can go. The full story wasn't necessary to get treatment, but then believing him was. "Just wasn't payin' attention, let myself get tackled a little too hard. Big kid, number 23."

She nods and scribbles something on a clipboard, the scratch of a drying pen on paper setting Billy's teeth on edge. That combined with the way the bright LED lights make him feel like his head's going to pop, he's starting to think this concussion is probably a little worse than he thought.

The nurse tells them to follow her, eyeing Hopper like she isn't expecting him to come too, and, judging from the look on his face, it doesn't look like he was either. She puts him in a room and has another staring match with the chief, her silent request for him to sit down in the metal chair beside the bed Billy had sat on being turned down by the crossing of his arms.

Without even waiting a moment for the door to close after the nurse flits out with the promise of the doctor seeing him in a few, though at the rate this hospital went that would mean no less than a half hour, Hopper speaks a stern "Hargrove." into the room.

Billy returns it with more feigned nonchalance, the anxiety buried under the surface of his beating heart again after his outburst in the locker room. "Chief."

"I thought you were going to get help." His tone and his affect are flat, and Billy searches hard for the twitch of an upper lip, the wrinkle in an eyebrow, but he doesn't find that, or any signs of anger in the chief's face. What is actually there is something a lot harder for him to recognize. Something like concern.

"Yeah from you, *maybe*. But you already know what's gonna happen if I get anyone else involved in this."

"You just lied through your damn teeth. To a doctor." More reasoning, this man thought he knew everything, but Billy really doesn't want to argue anymore, he just wants the chief to leave him the hell alone and let him get this over with already. But he'd already

rolled over once, he might not be willing to put in the effort, but he's still standing his ground.

"A nurse, technically." In response, Hopper looks disappointed in him almost, that look on his face changing to something a little too solemn to be the frustration Billy was getting used to seeing there, and somehow, it made him feel even more on edge.

Where before he was just arguing to argue, this made him feel like he had to justify himself to Hop, prove himself to him somehow, so he does, or tries to. "Did you really think just 'cause some *cop* pressured me into admitting my business I was gonna start airing it out for the whole town to hear?"

Without seeing any reaction from the man, Hopper just listening with his arms crossed, his fire goes out, and he mumbles the last part, "I'm not *that* stupid, chief."

Something in the chief's demeanor switches, his arms uncrossing slowly like he's realizing for the first time that *maybe* Billy's not all in the wrong here. Good, Billy thinks, until the chief says, "Just, be honest about your injuries, alright, kid?" and steps toward the door.

A dozen scenarios flash through Billy's head all at once, the fear that Hopper was going to leave him there, force him to find his own way back to his house something like 12 miles away, or that he might tell someone at the front desk that he'd lied. That he might even call Neil. "Where're you going?"

"You're right, it's none of my business." He turns away from Billy, putting his hat back on as he rounds into the hallway through the open door. He throws a glance at him that just *feels* back-handed and Billy feels his stomach twist, his fears realized.

It must show in his face, that stomach dropping betrayal, because Hop stops in the doorway, stepping aside for a moment as the nurse comes back with a cart load of examination tools, before saying, "I'll just be out in the waiting room, kid."

And even though he isn't alone, Billy still feels like he's suffocating. The endless sterile white feeling like it's caging him in, the sheets

underneath him like they're rubbing his skin raw. He's struggling for a breath, only snapping out of it when the nurse asks him to follow her pen with his eyes.

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They do all their tests, and after what had to be hours of waiting around and being poked and prodded, they determine he had two cracked ribs, a sprained knee, and a bad concussion. Which, yeah, he could've guessed all of that, but having it on paper somehow made it feel more real.

Made the ache settle just a little deeper into his body until he was exhausted.

Back in the waiting room Hopper tosses him the keys to his truck and tells him to hobble on out into the parking lot on the crutch they gave him while he finished some paperwork for him. It's pitch black outside, crickets chirping in the distant trees, and he wonders just what time it is, how long he'd been in there.

And wonders too, or rather, anticipates the fact that Neil is going to be mad he's out so late.

All he can hope now is that the hospital won't bring it up with his dad, but he knows how it looks. Football injuries were usually brought to the hospital in an ambulance, not with a personal escort from the chief of police.

He tears the hospital bracelet off in the car, and tries to come up with as my way he could hide the fact that he had been admitted to the emergency room at all. But would it be worth it then, to be seen getting out of an older man's car after so many hours if he hadn't taken him somewhere? Neil would never believe him if he said he'd just been helping him out.

The best he could come up with was to ask the chief to drop him off out of sight of the house so he could say he'd been at a friend's house, but there were two major problems with that. For one thing, he'd have to convince Hopper to let him walk a distance back to house, which was honestly something *he* wasn't even sure he could do right

now, and there was still the glaringly obvious fact that he didn't even have any friends, let alone anyone close enough to burden with this.

Hopper knocks on the window to remind Billy to unlock the door, his knuckles rattling the glass hollowly and startling Billy, who had been so focused on his internal debate he'd missed him coming out of the hospital.

When he gets in he doesn't say much of anything, just asks Billy for directions back to his place.

It's a quiet ride all the way back to Cherry, Billy dozing on and off in the passenger seat through the half-hour drive, and Hop, who was looking guiltier with each turn they made closer to the house, not knowing what to do. Billy guesses he can't blame him for that, cops usually arrest the bad guy, not drive their victims right on back to him.

Though he had honestly been expecting him not to listen to his pleas to keep his secret, to remember that vulnerability he let slip in the locker room and *do* something about it. But he had, listened that is, hadn't done anything, or even offered to do anything beyond his vague threats, and if you really got down to it, Billy was maybe even a little disappointed about that.

It was hypocritical, he'd been the one who insisted there be no cops involved, but he would absolutely be lying if he said it didn't hurt. Didn't make him feel that much more helpless, more defeated, more damned to be stuck in this cycle until the day it put him six feet under.

If Hopper notices the tears that run down his cheeks, he doesn't say anything. Billy thinks that's only fair, since he didn't say anything about the way his nervous fingers drummed against the steering wheel, or he reached out and turned the radio up and down a dozen times before he slammed the dial to turn it off.

They finally get to Billy's house nearing two in the morning, according to the clock in the dashboard. It takes more effort than it should to sit up in his seat and unbuckle so he can get out, and before he can even think about doing so, Hopper asks, "There anything else

you need from me kid?”

The answer is obvious, the truth that they're both still dancing around; Billy needs help he can't ask for, and Hopper seemingly doesn't know how to give it. But all he does is shake his head, pull up on the lock on the door.

Hopper watches him get out, waiting until his feet are unevenly on the ground to roll the window down and lean over in his seat. Billy slams the door in his face, or at least he tries to, but he's weak and tired and it hardly even closes, until Hop reaches over and pulls it the rest of the way closed. “Don't hesitate to tell the snitch if you need me again, okay?”

“Yeah, 'cause that's all that matters, right? Do it for poor little Maxine.” Billy huffs out in response, fighting every muscle in his body telling him to storm away. He'd rather stand on the sidewalk, impatiently waiting in a stalemate with Hopper, who doesn't respond with anything more than an annoyed look, but doesn't pull away from the curb yet either.

Because there's a sneaking suspicion in Billy's mind that he's not going to be let in when he gets up to the door and honestly, he just doesn't want to deal with Hopper anymore. All the fake concern and nasty remarks, he's already bored of it and just wants to be alone, no bullshit cops and their half-executed savior complexes.

He wins the battle, the chief sighing and muttering “Just stay out of trouble, Hargrove.” before rolling the window back up and driving off as slow as can be. Billy finally hobbles up to the stoop, and his guess was right, the door is locked up tight.

That's supposed to be some sort of taunting from his dad, leaving the dim porch light on him for him, moths buzzing around it as it casts a gentle glow on the front of the house, which itself doesn't seem to have any lights on inside, but locking him out anyways. The doorbell was dead when they got here, he doesn't bother with it, knocking instead, the screen door noisily shaking in its frame with the raps of his open palm.

He waits a few minutes, shifting his weight against the crutch to try

to relieve some of the pressure building painfully in his knee, then knocks again, but still nobody answers.

It takes a herculean effort to bend down and check under the mat, but the key underneath is gone already, that he's guessing he can blame Max for, so he tries the door one more time, but there's still no answer.

There's no way he's spending all night out here, freezing to death and still in so much pain, the medicine the doctors gave him not doing much yet, because their porch doesn't even have any place to sit down. If only he hadn't been so afraid to just go with Hopper, he wouldn't be in this mess.

He kicks a flower pot and regrets it instantly, both because of the noise it makes and the shot of pain that goes up his leg and into his back, sharp enough it takes his breath away and makes him curse. The longer he has to stand out there, the closer he feels himself getting to just breaking the window with the end of his crutch, until he sees Max coming around the side of the house in her pjs and a pair of his boots, carrying a little flashlight with her.

She shines the light in his face and calls to him quietly, her voice almost lost to the fall leaves in the trees that surrounded their property rustling, "Billy, come around back, I unlocked the back door for you."

"Can't you just let me in here?" He doesn't lower his voice, and she holds a finger to her lips, to tell him to quiet down.

The walk to the back door isn't far at all, but it's hilly and the grass would be slippery. Billy honestly didn't know if he could do it on a crutch, sore as he was, but Max shakes her head in denial, offering nothing more than, "Neil's sleeping on the couch tonight."

And really, Billy doesn't need anything more than that to know he'd rather run a marathon right now than have to deal with that mess, that the maybe five extra minutes of pain it would take to go around back would be worth it, if it meant not disturbing his dad.

Because if Neil was sleeping on the couch that meant he had messed

up *bad*, probably something to do with Max, and was too drunk to drive himself back to the bar or to work like he usually did when he got kicked out of the bed. Waking him up now would mean another trip to Hawkins General no doubt.

So Billy grumbles and gets down off the porch, and though he's slow moving, Max shortens her stride so she can walk right beside him. He stops once because he steps a little off on uneven ground and felt it in his whole body, and she looked ready to panic until he mumbled out that he was fine, shooing her away when she tried to give him her hand.

The back door feels like it's a thousand miles away, and by the time they get there he's right on the verge of tears, especially when the door opens and he's hit by the dry warmth of artificial heat from the thermostat. Max notices, she always does, and gives him a sympathetic look before she opens the door, opening it wide and stepping aside for him to go through first.

Max shuts and locks the door gently as can be once they're both inside, so as not to alert their parents, and follows Billy all the way into his room, lingering by the closed door even as he's tossing the crutch over onto the bed, watching it bounce and hit his wall, then collapsing onto his couch.

He settles in as well as he can still in his uniform, growing the more uncomfortable by the minute in the dirty old jersey, waiting for her to leave, but she doesn't, and he already knows from her downcast eyes, her shut off look that she's going to bring it up, what she did. "So, um, how did it go?"

Billy rolls his eyes and doesn't respond. He notices the pack of cigarettes he left on his nightstand, and tells Max to, "Give those here."

With attitude, she does, snatching them and his lighter both off the surface of the little side table and shoving them towards him. He lights up, trying not to blow smoke in her face in case she were to tattle again, and she asks him another question, coughing just a little as the smoke starts to fill the closed in space of his bedroom. "Well did he, like, say anything?"

“Lots.” Even as worn out as he was he still found it in himself to be pissed off. “What the hell’d I tell you about telling other people our business?”

“I’m not sorry.” He scoffs at her audacity, the way she crosses her arms and turns her chin up. It makes her deflate, to realize he’s not thrilled about what happened. He’s blowing her off and she’s desperate, “Billy you needed help.”

“Never needed it before.”

“Oh right, because you wouldn’t have benefited from having help at *all* when he broke your arm and all you had was an ace bandage?”

He scowls, she wasn’t supposed to know about that. “It healed up didn’t it?”

But that’s not a good enough excuse. She goes a little pink, and, her voice getting wobbly with frustration, asks, “What about when you got cut so bad you had to give yourself stitches?”

“Hey, that was my best work yet.” Max glares at him hard for that, his futile attempt at a sense of humor in such a situation making her only more upset. Her voice only gets more annoyed as she further berates him. “Well what about when he beat you half to death and moved us across the country?”

“If memory serves, I handled that just fine.” His cigarette burns out, so he crushes it against the arm of the couch and lets it fall into the trash can right beside it. Max glares at him, scowls at the way he’s acting like he doesn’t care, and doesn’t quit pressing, shooting back with, “Yeah, because you pretty much passed out for two days straight in the car.”

“That was your fault anyways, Max! Because you couldn’t keep your mouth shut then, and you can’t now either!” He’s on the verge of shouting, but his voice is still quiet. The risk of what would happen if he got caught yelling at sweet little Max far outweighed the reward of feeling big for a few minutes. “What would really help me was if you just did what I told you!”

Something he's learned about Max though though is that, since she'd ballsed up in November, she didn't let him boss her around like that anymore. His authority as the asshole big brother was all but diminished, and she whisper-yelled right back at him. "If I did that you'd be dead by now! Why won't you just let me help you!"

"Because you're going to get yourself caught up in this mess! You haven't even realized how close he got to hitting you that night! And every night since!" His voice cracks, not enough and still too much of the hurt he tried to pretend wasn't there showing in his words. "You don't know *anything*."

But that little hint of an emotional response isn't enough to sway Max, she learned from the best not to let her guard down, not to take any shit. She doesn't skip a beat in biting back, "I know that you're my brother, and I know that you scared me tonight. I thought- well you *know* what I thought. It's not a personal attack if I told Hopper so he could help you."

"Yeah? And a lot of good that did. You can't trust just anybody, Max." There's no maliciousness there, just plain old, worn out bereavement. His last hurrah before he let Max win.

"He's not *just anybody*, Billy, he's the chief of police." In the same way the fight drained out of Billy, it seemed to do the same for Max. She sits down in the armrest of the couch, kicking her feet against the base, picking at her nail while she went on, "And he has a daughter too, whose dad was sort of like yours, before he adopted her."

"Then I feel sorry for her." Plenty of people had dads like his, but not everyone had to deal with two assholes. After the lovely display the chief'd shown him in the locker room, Billy quite frankly didn't see how Hopper *didn't* fall into that category. "But what does that got to do with me?"

With a huff, she explains, "Well he took *her* in from that so I just thought, you know, that he'd maybe understand about you and, like, do that for you too."

Before he can argue further, it hits Billy like a ton of bricks, what she just said. She had actually wanted the chief to take him away from

here, take him out and save him from this mess, no matter what that would have meant for her. The little shit and her stupid naivety. If only, if only.

Still, a childish wish as it may have been, he's so stupefied by it he doesn't even have a response, and Max takes it as her invitation to leave his room.

With soft and slow steps, she strides towards the door, so gentle, so apprehensive, her footfalls make no sound on the carpet. Stopping with her hand around his door knob, she turns to look at Billy, her crystal blue eyes glistening with tears that makes that guilty pit in his stomach grow even deeper.

Her voice is wobbly, barely more than a whisper as she addresses him, "Billy?"

The time for being defensive had passed, the guilt he never quite knew how to make up for already settling in deep. "What is it, shitbird?"

"I-" Whatever it is she wants to say, she can't spit it out, her lip is pulled between her teeth while she tries and tries to get her words to come out, fighting through what seems on her part to be a pretty big effort. A single tear slips past, and she looks something like defeated when she settles for saying, "Good night, Billy."

Not knowing what else to do, and especially not wanting to push her away after what she's done for him and the mean things he already said to her, he returns it, a soft, "Night, kiddo." just before she shuts his door, clicking the lock back into place.

Everything went wrong and he's just, beyond done with the way things were. If he wasn't so out of it he'd have torn the room apart, so much anger with himself he could've broken every bedpost, dresser, and torn every pillow, punched a hole in every wall, but he couldn't muster more than an elbow into the couch, and a bitter sob rising in his throat.

The pain meds and the guilt are having a battle over his consciousness, the deep lull of sleep fighting desperately against

racing thoughts, glaring emotions. Billy thinks this is exhaustion like he's never known it, pinning him to the couch and crawling it's way into every inch of his head, dragging out all the untouched thoughts he kept stored away to keep him pinned there.

Like it was the lack of sleep that was forcing personal introspection and not what Max had done for him, what the chief had too. What Neil had done *to* him.

He wishes things could be different, wishes it didn't take so much just to ask for help, wishes he wasn't such an ass to his sister when she was just looking out for him. Why was it that when someone finally did for him what he'd wished anyone at all would for years he got so bitter, so scorned?

Well, he knows why, but it wasn't *fair*, that just one someone could make him feel that way. That the man who was supposed to have raised him chose instead to make him so dependent on isolation, so afraid of anything else, just to make it easier to hurt him, that had to be the universe's shittiest hand dealt to date.

Now he was hurt so badly he couldn't even react to it, bedridden by the pain and cut off from doing what he loved, so that he was stuck just feeling all these feelings he only knew how to deal with by lashing out.

He starts getting drowsy there on the couch, itching so badly for another cigarette between his lips, or even just to leave one burning in the ashtray, but he's too worn to the bone to even do that.

It's not a natural sleep, if he wasn't drugged up on hospital grade painkillers he's sure he'd still be wide awake, but as the tight hold of a well needed sleep starts to take him, soothing the ache all over his body and making him sink heavy into the leather cushions, he swears he can still hear the echoing of that night's crowd, the announcer over the loudspeaker, his fans and his friends in all their disappointment that number six couldn't get his act-right together for long enough to be a man and finish his own game, ringing in his ears.

It's that stomach-turning disappointment, those expectations-turned-

regrets, along with the lingering words of the chief and his sister, in all their superficially genuine concern, that finally push him to just give in to the calm.

Notes for the Chapter:

Here y'all are! Sorry this took ages to get to posting, it's almost all dialogue and I find that very hard to write, especially in this case because I've never written Hopper before, so sorry if it's a little sloppy! This was a challenge but I'm glad to finally have it out to you guys! Much love from EJ!

Author's Note:

Updates on this are probably gonna be somewhat slow, at least for my usual chapter a day pace! Until next time, <3 from EJ!